GOD AND THE POSSIBLE
Matthew 14:22-33
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From the mythology of ancient Egypt to the Athletic Department at Ohio State University, "walking on water" has been a timeless metaphor for the supernatural. The Egyptians used "walking on water" as a synonym for the impossible. And former basketball coach, Fred Taylor, recently told about the burden of coaching at the Ohio State at the same time as Woody Hayes. "we used to be invited down to the river every Monday," Taylor said, "to watch Woody take his walk." There are countless bad jokes about it. Walking on water represents the awesome nature of the divine, in contrast to the human; the supernatural in contrast to the natural; the truly free, in contrast to the limited, restricted humanity which belongs to all of us. It is, for some, the embarrassing side of religion: the superstitious, irrational motif which we try to ignore as much as possible. Some passionately wish for religion without it, common sense religion based on sound morality, healthy behavior and attitudes. Thomas Jefferson, immanently a man of reason, rewrote the Gospels, eliminating all the incidents which conflicted with his understanding of the laws of nature.

The supernatural and the superstitious seem to go together. And superstition has been no real friend of human progress. We are condiderably better off investing our efforts in irrigation systems rather than writing new liturgies for rain dances. It is generally a better bet to use the resources at one's disposal to confront whatever hurdle is ahead, rather than waiting for a divine intervention to remove the hurdle.

And yet - troublesome issues remain for the thoughtful Christian. If God does not or cannot intervene in creation in a way that conflicts with or supersedes the laws of nature, in what sense does God exist? If God is constrained in being God as we are in being human, in what sense does he exist? If religion is merely a way of thinking, an ethical system, an approach to healthy relationships, why are we bothering with all this mysterious ceremony, lighting candles, mumbling prayers, breaking bread, singing hymns? We can't, it seems, get rid of God. We can't get rid of the thought of a God who is God. Even those who have never seen nor experienced one incident of God intervening suddenly and miraculously and visibly cannot rid themselves of the notion. Nor even our brightest, most rational seem to live very long without some sense of awe and mystery.

We can't apparently, go too far without bumping into him, or him bumping into us, as it were... not even out in a boat, in the middle of the night, in a storm. This sort of thing never goes very well in the retelling, any more than you and I can capture the essence of an athletic performance, or a violin solo, or a painting, or a cardinal at the feeder and tell someone else about it the next day. You know, even as you're telling it, that you're not getting the job done, that big pieces of what you experienced are falling through your fingers like so much sand, and increasing the number of adjectives or the volume of your voice will not help much. You really did need to be there - which is what those disciples surely must have thought when they tried to tell about something that happened to them one time.

There they were in a small, squat, single-masted fishing boat, tacking across the Sea of Galilea which is really just a fair sized lake, at a point near the north end about five miles wide. One of them tended the rudder, another worked with the sail, and the rest were probably dozing. It was three a.m. Early, the day before, Jesus had fed a multitude of people with a few fish and loaves of bread. The crowds were pressing him a bit so he ordered his disciples to sail across the lake. He wanted to pray alone, he said. He would walk around the north shore and meet them in the morning on the other side. A squall came up, as often happens at the location. The squat little vessel would have been capable of handling some heavy weather, I should have thought.And most of the people in her were fishermen. They knew what to do and how to do it. They weren't particularly frightened; they just weren't getting anywhere. The wind had picked up and changed and they were headed almost directly into it, and they were making very little headway. And then something happened that none of them understood: something so incredible., so inexplicable, that the retelling of it still made the hair stand up on the back of their necks decades later. Maybe it was shallow. Maybe the squall had pushed them up into that northern basin and they were so busy and the full moon was under the clouds and they hadn't noticed how close to shore they were. Maybe Jesus was walking the north shore and when the clouds broke saw the little vessel beating, getting nowhere, and very simply, walked through the shallow surf to them. There is even a school of thought which proposed what I call the "on-beside-toward" approach to the incident, working very hard to prove that the Greek preposition translated "on the water", can also be translated "beside the ocean" or "toward the ocean". Presbyterians ordinarily issue an almost liturgical, corporate sigh of relief when they hear that.

But the story isn't over yet. Those hard boiled, tough fishermen, working that little boat, who were totally engrossed in the task ahead, now became very, very frightened; scared out of their wits. What Jesus said to them was, in a sense, the most terrifying thing of all. "Don't be afraid. It is I" isn't quite right. He spoke in Aramaic, I suppose, but I'd really like to think he drew on a Hebrew phrase he had been taught as a youngster and which the others would have recognized immediately: that curious form of the "be" verb which Moses hears at the burning bush. "Who's there? What's your name?" Moses asked. What he heard was "I am..." "I will be what I will be"..."I am who I am". The Greek text allows it and that's what I think Jesus said. Peter responds by wanting to get into the act, and before you know it, he's out of the boat and somehow managing all right until he begins to sink, or stumble, or go under and Jesus has to put him back on his feet which is not a new thing for Jesus to be doing to Peter. It's no wonder we wish that weren't in the text.

"I never saw no stuff like that," a youngster confessed to me once after Sunday School when he heard about the parting of the Red Sea. The German Philosopher, Lessing wrote, "Miracles that I see with my own eyes are one thing; miracles that I only know through history... are quite another. Reports of miracles are still far from being miracles." (seeHerbert Thielicke, How to Believe Again, p. 65) That is to say,...Lessing "never saw no stuff like that" either. Nor have we, nor are we talking if we have, unless of course, we can broaden out the playing field and the rules and call those five by-passes that saved a life up at University Hospital yesterday a miracle

of healing, or that vehicle we're going to hurtle up into space tomorrow, or the fact that you can pick up a piece of black plastic connected to a wire and talk to somebody in a phone booth in Brussels.

The trouble is, we hardly ever deal with the meaning of this business, we're so occupied with fussing over the staging. The trouble is that stories like this often become the context for ultimate theological decisions. We somehow manage to tie the very existence of God to the plausibility of the stories. In JesusChrist Superstar, King Herod says it rather well, really:

> "If you are the Christ, the great Jesus Christ
> Prove to me that you're no fool
> Walk across my swimming pool.
> Prove to me that you're divine,
> Change my water into wine."

The Bible doesn't help much when we reason like that. It simply isn't interested in the question. Nor do the people who wrote the Bible think like we do. They are not at all concerned about the laws of nature: they never heard of the phrase, frankly. They're stunned by what they experience, but it doesn't send them scurrying to the laboratory to see whether they have been hoodwinked, or whether what they know about water displacement must be revised. At some point, difficult as it is, we have to let go of the issue. We don't know what happened. I don't think the people on the scene knew what happened. Consistently in the Gospel narration, the people standing around seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, smelling, don't know what's going on. Difficult as it is for us, "Did it happen?" is not the relevant question. "What is the meaning of the event?" "What is the human experience the story points to?"... are the relevant questions.

For the record, however, the scientists aren't nearly as sure of themselves as we wish they were. Lewis Thomas, author, distinguished biologist, wrote an article for last Sunday's New York Time Magazine, in which he observes that "Most sciences are in their very earliest stages. In the life sciences it is required that the most expert and sophisticated minds be capable of changing course - often with a great lurch - every few years... Next week's issue of any scientific journal can turn a whole field upside down." (Time Magazine, 3/14/82, p. 89)

It really is not adequate to define a miracle as an event which breaks the laws of nature. In the Bible, a miracle is any event which reveals the power of God. Hans Kung defines miracle as "anything that arouses human wonder, including the creation and conservation of the world." (Does God Exist?, p. 650) George Arthur Buttrick wrote similiarly that a miracle is "any event that pierces our dullness or despair to convince us of the presence and power of God." (Interpretor's Bible, Vol. 7, p. 433) C.S. Lewis wrote a book under the title Miracles, and discussed the complex relationship between the creator, the laws of nature he created, and whether or not he was free to intervene. Lewis concluded that God pierces nature whenever there

is a human mind. The sheer unaccountable mystery of the human intellect, the capacity to think about self, the capacity to feel and create, was for C.S. Lewis, evidence that everything in nature is not determined, and limited by instinct, drives and hormones. I'm ready to define as miracle every instance of human creativity, from primitive drawings on cave walls, to little children somehow getting on paper the purity and joy of a tulip, to the elegance of Renoir. That is not natural. It comes from somewhere else. I'm ready to call miracle every incident of human nature becoming something more than instinctive, self protection: when people sacrifice, and love and show compassion. Very simply, I know lots of people who love others more than they love their own lives. That's a miracle. That is not a product of instinct, hormones, natural drive. That points to God.

What if we had some proof? Put a better way, what evidence could convince us that Jesus walked on the water? Is there any way, other than experiencing it personally, that you and I could be convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that it happened? Probably not, but the more important point is that Jesus himself would not accept our belief in him if we based it on his ability to walk on water. No dynamic is clearer than that in the New Testament. People keep asking him for a sign, a miracle; people keep following him because they have heard that he performs miracles. But Jesus consistantly asks them not to think too much of it, not to tell about, not to follow him on that basis. The final answer to our questions about miracles then is provided by our Lord. Faith in him is not believing that he walked on water.

The real miracle is what the story proposes about God; namely that we can count on his presence in the midst of the very real crisis we encounter along the way.

The meaning of this miracle is that the Jesus of Christian faith is not just a figure in history, but a personal savior. We're inclined to forget that...we educated Presbyterians. We're inclined to think we're dealing with Gospel when we read books about the historical Jesus, or attend seminars and have learned discussions on the doctrine of atonement. Several years ago a popular song, with heavy religious overtones, swept the country: "Bridge over Troubled Waters". Those were troubled years, and I never heard the song without thinking that the culture, particularly the young people who were singing the song were saying something very honest and important about themselves. People don't need dry dogma: people need a bridge over troubled waters.

The meaning of this miracle is that in Jesus Christ God offers to be a savior. In Jesus Christ God comes into the crisis. That boat must have been a very frantic place. If you've been on a boat of any size you know that even a little rough weather commands a lot of attention and that very rough weather demands intense, total concentration. The author may not have intended it, but I see in that intense, concentrated, hard working crew of people, a metaphor for the life I see you living and which I live myself.

They weren't praying and singing hymns on that boat. They were doing what you and I do most of the time. They were working, very hard, very in-

tensely to make some headway.. They were struggling for survival and frankly, they weren't getting anywhere. I don't have to use much imagination to see in that a metaphor for the kind of intense, strong commitment to achievement, success, accomplishment which characterizes the lives of most people I know. We live, most of us, on the far side of business, right on the edge of chaos. And there isn't a one of us who doesn't sit up from the oars and wonder if we're getting anywhere, if we'll make it: if there is a resource we haven't drawn on yet.

This story is the incredible Good News that in Jesus Christ, God stretches out a hand of steady comfort, or understanding, of acceptance, of power. This story is about a savior who doesn't forget about us, even while we are totally preoccupied with the tasks at hand. It is about a God who sometimes invites us to follow in ways as dramatic and risky as Peter's stepping out of that boat; a God who promises to save us if we can summon courage enough to trust him; a God who will come to us, and give us strength we need when the water is choppy and the boat has headed into a stiff wind. It is a story which declares God's faithfulness, God's love, and the Good News that we can count on his presence, that nothing shall ever separate us from him.

There simply are not any miracles better than that. Amen.

God of love, come to us in our busy, frantic lives. Come to us across troubled waters. Come to us in the midst of the tasks to which we give ourselves. Come to us: and give us grace to look up from those tasks to greet you: in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.